

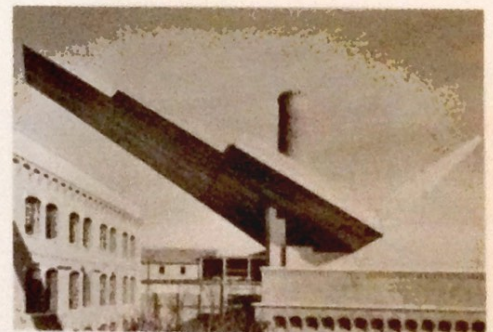
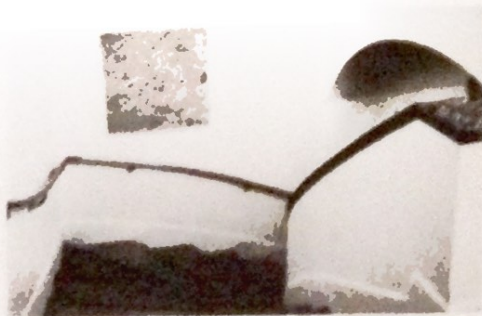
Trading between Architecture and Art



Strategies
and Practices
of Exchange



Wouter Davidts,
Susan Holden,
Ashley Paine (eds.)



vis-à-vis

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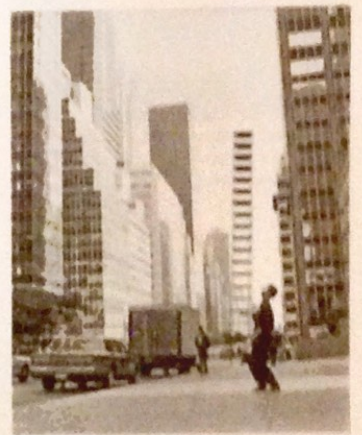
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The Terms of Trade of Architecture and Art

Wouter Davidts, Susan Holden,
Ashley Paine

An artist appears in a photograph. On the pavement of 52nd Street in New York, just around the corner from the Museum of Modern Art, he is balancing a makeshift tower on his left hand, not unlike a circus juggler. The tower, made of eighteen square plates supported by drinking glasses at the four corners, resonates with the assorted skyscrapers that flank both sides of the Manhattan street. Anxious but determined, the artist keeps control of the precarious construction, bending his knees slightly. Passers-by seem unconcerned and pay no attention, while the artist, Job Koelewijn, remains deeply engrossed in his own perilous pursuit. We do not know what happens next.¹

Koelewijn performed his *A Balancing Act* in 1998, during a long-term artist's residency at PS1. The work gives expression to the uncertainty the artist experienced during his time in New York, intimidated by both the scale and intensity of the city. Steadying the delicate edifice on the palm of his hand, the work points to Koelewijn's daily efforts to hold his ground as an artist, while maintaining a balance between private possibilities and public demands. Here,



1 Job Koelewijn, *A Balancing Act*, 1998, photograph.



2 Job Koelewijn, *Cleaning of the Rietveld Paviljoen*; performance at the Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam.



Job Koelewijn, *Real Fiction Cinema*, 2010–12, various sites in Switzerland.

architecture serves as a means to reflect on the fate of the artist, and becomes a medium of self-reflection. Koelewijn's work is demonstrative of just some of the ways in which architecture, building, and the city have become materials for art today.² That is, for Koelewijn and many of his contemporaries, architecture is not so much a subject, but a vehicle for practice—a means through which to mobilize thoughts and articulate ideas.

In this light, art and architecture can be seen coming together not in new hybrid or amalgam forms, but as taking part in a process of trade and exchange that, like Koelewijn's own balancing act, produces particular and often unstable scenarios with unpredictable outcomes. Indeed, it is this exchange of disciplinary concepts and tools that establishes the dynamic scene in which art and architecture meet, intersect, clash or pull away. On this veritable trading floor of culture, artists and architects negotiate that which is of value or at stake: transactions that add up to the 'terms of trade' for architecture and art today. And, in much the same way as a nation's economic terms of trade provide a measure of future financial prospects—not to mention something of the very character of those nations, defined by that which is imported and exported—interrogating the trade between art and architecture can offer unique insights into the opportunities and potentials of contemporary practice.

This practice of trade begins largely in the 1960s, a time marked by many radical and canonical exchanges between artists and architects. Artists took on the conventions, language, and scale of architecture as an integral part of their work, utilizing plans and models, building structures and pavilions, or intervening in urban and public spaces, as a way of critiquing the traditional terms and limits of art. With a similar intensity, architects adopted strategies from the visual

arts, planting exhibitions, and such explorations of functionalist and museums became by bringing to the venture, by staging and architecture and with a great research architecture has tific research and source for the Moreover, ma pend the tradi tive disciplines confront us wi has engendere objects that, w the interpretive Hence, as artis gies, the inheri critical vocabu In particular, tion of practice However, such nature of the fi ness, or of the projects deploy tions—like dif

This book *Trade* with the compl

arts, planting 'artistic' installations in art galleries, making exhibitions, and joining biennales and art events. Through such explorations, architects attempted to break free from functionalist and formalist conventions. Art galleries and museums became accomplices in this trafficking and, by bringing together exemplary practices from both sides of the venture, have redefined the role of the institution in staging and administering disciplinary difference. Since then, architecture and art have become robust trading partners with a great richness and diversity of interaction. Whereas architecture has become a commonplace instrument for artistic research and production, art has in turn offered a rich source for theoretical and formal expansion in architecture. Moreover, many of the resulting projects purposefully suspend the traditional distinctions drawn between the respective disciplines. As Anthony Vidler has argued, such works confront us with a remarkable challenge: "This intersection has engendered a kind of "intermediary art", comprised of objects that, while situated ostensibly in one practice, require the interpretive terms of another for their explication."³ Hence, as artists and architects exchange means and strategies, the inherited theoretical frames of reference, and our critical vocabularies to describe them, increasingly fall short. In particular, there is a tendency to characterize this proliferation of practices and projects as an ever-expanding field.⁴ However, such generalized summations tell us little about the nature of the field itself, its points of intensity and unevenness, or of the specific contests and traits such practices and projects deploy: those *frictions* that disciplinary distinctions—like differences between close friends—entail.

This book *Trading between Architecture and Art* contends with the complexity of those dealings between architecture

3 Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), viii.

4 The main historical reference for this discussion is Rosalind Krauss' seminal essay 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' (in: *October* 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 30-44) which continues to shape present day discussions. See for example: Spyros Papapetros and Julian Rose, *Retracing the Expanded Field: Encounters Between Art and Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014); Ila Berman and Douglas Burnham, *Expanded Field: Architectural Installation Beyond Art* (Novato, CA: AR+D Publishing, 2016).

nary difference, historically and in the present. To this end, the book proceeds via concrete cases. Each contribution focuses on a specific instance of the two-way transaction between architecture and art: artists adopting architectural means on the one hand, and architects adopting artistic strategies on the other. Each essay is conceived as an in-depth examination of those situations where traditional distinctions and disciplinary conventions become interestingly opaque, and meanings provocatively uncertain.

We argue that to start from the cases themselves, on their own terms, is paramount to this endeavor. As such, the general aim of this book is not to approach the cases with pre-established principles and set schemes, but to try to distill original insights from the chosen works as they present themselves to us. As a result, the cases are wide-ranging: some are iconic, others relatively obscure. Certainly, they make an idiosyncratic constellation in the expanding field of practices, spanning a period from the 1930s to the present, albeit with telling concentrations around the 1990s and in the 2000s. Again, this is not meant to propagate the notion of a pluralist fusion that has haunted the exchange between architecture and art ever since the advent of postmodernism. On the contrary, this book is driven by the thought that the most interesting cases in the past decades surpass the historical dream of a symbiosis between both disciplines. Most if not all of the cases discussed in this book pertain to projects within which the differences between architecture and art are put at stake: distinctions here are regarded as generative, rather than as problems to be solved.⁵ The works examined also reveal that

the trade between architecture and art is rarely reciprocal. Rather, it is fundamentally uneven, and frequently unstable.

© Yve-Alain Bois, *Printing as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 511

In granting these objects—whether artifacts, projects or events—pride of place, we lean heavily on Yve-Alain Bois' diatribe against what he terms theoreticism:

In fact, the first lesson to be learned from one of the theoreticians most likely to be invoked by theoreticists, Roland Barthes, is that one does not 'apply' a theory; that concepts must be forged from the object of one's inquiry or imported according to that object's specific exigency; and that the main theoretical act is to define this object, not the other way around.⁶

In many academic spheres today, a truly detailed reading of the actuality and specificity of artifacts has become rare. The prevailing urge to jump straight to the 'meaning' of a work makes many miss the critical resonance that a sincere reading might proffer. To this end, each essay in this book begins with a description of its object of scrutiny, whether it is an art exhibition, a pavilion, an installation, a scale model, or a set of collages. Indeed, the variety of these objects, and the singularity of the essays—both written and visual—is key to the conception of the collection. This idea is reinforced by the table of contents wherein all the contributions are listed without hierarchy, headings or other imposed structural articulations—not unlike an old-fashioned mixtape.

Still, in the great variety and richness of examples, some specific insights are revealed by this focused examination of architecture and art's terms of trade—insights that emerge across and between individual essays. For example, the notion of utility is recognizable as a recurrent topic for a number of authors and artists. Once invoked to draw a line

7 Maarten Liefoghe, 'On the Art/Architecture of Reframing an Industrial Site: Rotor's "Grindbakken" Exhibition', see pp. 207ff.

between disciplines (architecture has routinely been described as just 'sculpture with plumbing'), utility is exposed here as a more complex, sometimes spurious, but often unavoidable topos of contemporary practice, which plays out through the various social, formal, and aesthetic dimensions of both architecture and art. It also complicates the repertoire of how art and architecture are increasingly accounted for and valued in administrative and institutional settings. Ambiguity also arises in relation to the changing institutional and physical contexts of exhibition and display, and a number of contributions to the book examine episodes in the recent resurgence of interest in exhibitions of architecture, whether used as a means to frame and represent specific works and practices, or to create novel works or bodies of original research in their own right. In this context, architecture can be seen as reclaiming ground, in both a literal and metaphorical sense, within and beyond the institutions of art. Tellingly, issues such as utility and display can be seen as some of the common denominators of art and architectural practice today—the very currency of their trade. They are, after all, the kind of concepts and practices that, as one of the authors in this book insists, 'have no disciplinary home base'.⁷ As a compendium, *Trading between Architecture and Art* aims to enrich an understanding of the potential openings, and possible deadlocks, of such exchanges—to articulate in a specific way what is contested and what is transformed, as means and strategies are displaced, concepts shared, and contexts appropriated. On purpose it abstains from presenting an overarching theory, or an all-embracing diagram that is intended to map, define, or eventually retrace the expanded field of art and architecture as if it were a contiguous whole. It avoids this task in favor of a lively discussion of the terms of such trade. In the end we find that the question of whether a

project is either art or non-art, architecture or non-architecture, is not as illuminating as the pattern of disciplinary rivalries that become apparent through an examination of specific cases. The interest, we might say, lies less in how means and strategies mobilize disciplines than the other way around: how disciplinarity is articulated by the contest of concepts and through the trading of practices.

As this book shows, the terms of trade of architecture and art are necessarily worked through in practice, and on a case-by-case basis. Incidentally, in the particularity of this collection of focused studies, we are reminded of another work by Job Koelewijn—a giant wooden stamp made in 2003.⁸ With Vicks Vaporub, an ointment rubbed onto children's chests to cure them of a cough, one can imprint a giant text on the wall of a gallery or art institution. Retrospectively the text serves as a leitmotif, or catchphrase, for every contribution: it reads, 'Be More Specific'.



8 Job Koelewijn, *Untitled (Be More Specific)*, 2003